

# FROM EXPRESSIONISM TO REALISM A STUDY OF DENIS JOHNSTON'S PLAYS

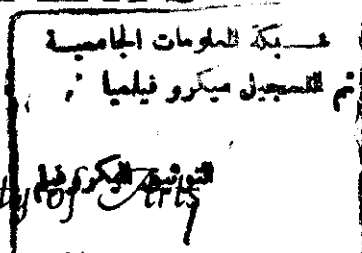


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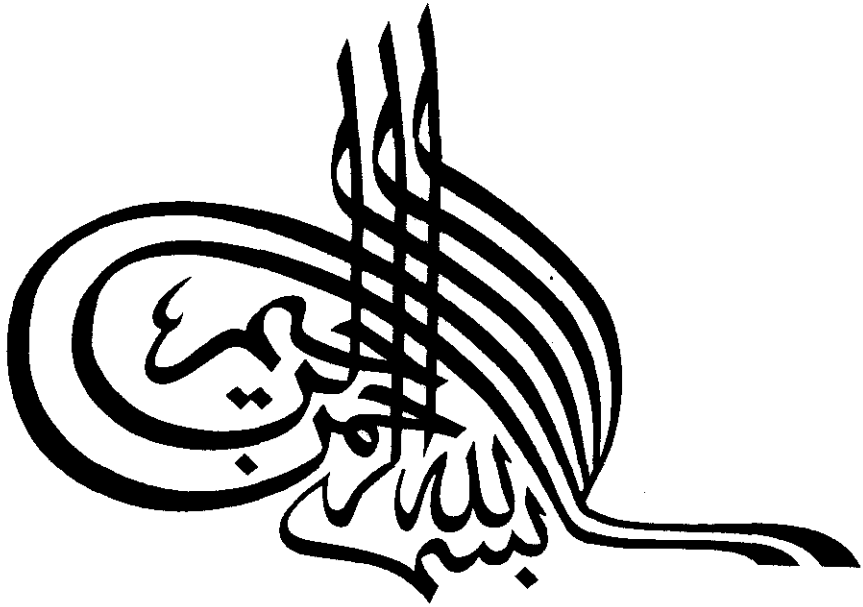
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ربنا آتينا من لسانك رحمة  
وهدية لنا من امرنا رشكا

صداق الله العظيم



*This work is didecated  
to*

*My parents , my husband  
and my children*

## *Acknowledgement*

*Praise be to God the Almighty for granting me success in this work .*

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Denis Johnston's dramatic contribution to the Irish theatre, and to carry out a study of his technique in the plays starting with his prior use of expressionism on to his later use of realism. The study will attempt to answer why he moved increasingly from expressionism to realism and to discuss a variety of forms that have influenced Johnston and endowed his drama with a sort of universality, enrichment and a highly suggestive quality that has made his works a challenge to scholars. The chapters will be divided accordingly, and plays, whether early or late will be classified according to their expressionistic or later realistic techniques. A study of the themes will also be carried out.

William Denis Johnston (1901-1987) is an Anglo- Irish playwright whose versatile work constitutes a significant achievement in the history of Irish drama. His works are uneven as they vacillate between the experimental and the conventional. He began his dramatic career with *The Old Lady Says: "No!"* (1929), the first fully expressionistic play in the Irish drama, and followed it by his unexpectedly realistic play, *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931) only to succeed it with *A Bride for the Unicorn* (1933) his highly experimental play. The following six years were devoted to writing three realistic plays: *Storm Song* (1934), *Blind Man's Buff* (1936) and *The Golden Cuckoo* (1939), to be shortly followed by one experimental play *The Dreaming Dust*. (1940) After a long period of non dramatic writing, Johnston went back to the realistic form in his last two plays: *Strange Occurrence on Ireland's Eye* (1956) and *The Scythe and the Sunset* (1958). Then finally came *Nine Rivers from Jordan* (1968), an operatic libretto in which he resorted to a final note of expressionism . Johnston wrote also plays for radio and television. This survey shows only one aspect of his many-sided career; he was a lawyer, actor,

director for theatre, radio and television as well as a war correspondent, philosopher, critic and academic. It is apparent also from this survey that the realistic plays overbalance the expressionistic ones in number . Yet the study reveals that his experimental attempts outweighs the realistic plays in value , and on them , lies his reputation as a leading figure in Irish drama .

Owing to the constantly shifting nature of his dramatic output and the highly suggestive and complex quality of some of his plays, the drama of Denis Johnston has presented a baffling challenge to contemporary readers and critics. The ambiguity of some of his plays and the versatility of technique that characterize them has made him an "uncomfortable" writer for critics and scholars, and has made it a difficult task to pigeonhole him in a certain literary genre.

Despite the apparent difficulty of such a dramatist , and the scarcity of references on him, something seems intriguing about him, particularly that unbridled tendency in Denis Johnston to shift from one technique to another. With the exception of two or three critical studies on Denis Johnston's drama, nothing dealt closely with the plays of this playwright who was regarded as "the spearhead of Irish drama". Johnston's dual interest in both expressionism and realism seems an unexplored land in spite of the fact that in both genres he proved himself master. The study uncovers the fact that this changeability of technique is due to Johnston's life-long endeavour to communicate with his audience, and to the fact that his work is but a sensitive measure that honestly reflects the different reverberations in the Irish dramatic scene.

When Denis Johnston was born in 1901, the Irish theatre had just begun its activity with five plays. Before the establishment of the Irish literary Theatre in 1899, there had been no drama at all written about Ireland by Irish men for an Irish audience. The earlier Irish stage was occupied by the



current English comedies and melodramas. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Irish Literary Theatre was established at the hands of W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, Edward Martyn and George Moore. The purpose was to revive the Celtic spirit and to build up an Irish school of dramatic literature independent from the English commercial theatre whose condition was deplorable at the time. It was occupied, together with the Irish theatre, with sensational episodes, stereotyped figures of melodrama, romance and farce as well as versions of Shakespeare adapted to suit the demands of fashionable players and an unsophisticated audience.

The founders of the Irish Literary Theatre had a strong desire to make it purely Irish. They aimed at presenting heroic Celtic legends, peasant stories and faithful images of the Irish character to stand against the caricatures of the popular stage and the distorted image of the stage Irishman that was meant to insult the Irish character. Thus, the works of the leading figures displayed a strong feeling for the heroic aspects of the Irish character, the every day problems of the Irish people and the peasant life of the simple folk. Their theatre was devoted to a highly idealized outlook that was not necessarily true to life. They were given up to educate the Irish how to appreciate their native heritage and to cast away long ages of psychological, intellectual and political subjectivity to another nation. With the exception of some of Synge's plays, there was no room for a play that would have an eye for the nation's frailties, or that would challenge national dignity by presenting a frank and objective outlook. Consequently, the Abbey became a conservative insular theatre. After Synge's death there came a group of prose realists including Colum, Boyle, Murray, Ervin and Shiels who clung to the folk peasant life of the Irish and who set up the realistic ground work of the Abbey that indulged in a self-imposed

isolationism and locked the door against recent continental drama.

At the time, new artistic trends were burgeoning everywhere in world drama at the hands of dramatists like Strindberg, Pirandello, Brecht, O'Neill and Giraudoux.. Young actors and playwrights, accordingly, had always a persistent wish for a renewal of forms and for seeing world drama with its wonderful variety. After World War One that wish was fulfilled at last by the Dublin Drama League that was formed by Lennox Robinson in 1918. It provided an outlet for the young theatre people to get acquainted with, and be trained in modern techniques, for it allowed them to see and perform plays by Andreyev, Benavante, Strindberg, O'Neill and Pirandello. The Dublin Drama League had a pervasive influence on the works of O'Casey, Robinson, and Johnston, and it prepared Dublin for the Gate Theatre that was established in 1928 by Michael Mac Liammoir and Hilton Edwards. The Gate provided a counterbalancing effect to the Abbey's strict provincialism by patronizing the avant garde trends in world drama and by mounting the experimental plays rejected by the Abbey directorate, including Johnston's own *The Old Lady Says: "No!"*

The Gate was like a new window on world drama through which the winds of renewal and change began to blow steadily on the Irish theatre. All this encouraged Sean O'Casey to write *The Silver Tassie* (1928) with a second act written purely in the expressionistic technique. Lennox Robinson was encouraged also to try his hand at expressionism in two of his plays. However, those were regarded as unsuccessful attempts at the new technique. It was Johnston's *The Old Lady* which was the first successful venture at expressionism and which came as a natural outcome of the rising spirit of experimentation that prevailed the theatre people. Still, it is not paradoxical to say that when Johnston turned to realism he was corresponding to the

aims of the Irish theatre. When he wrote *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931) in realistic form, realism had retained its dominance on the taste of playgoers especially after independence and the rising of the Irish Free State in 1922. The highly idealized outlook that characterized the national taste during the occupation gave way to a much more realistic attitude during the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, Johnston was ever searching for adequate means of communication with his audience. This was what urged him to resort to realism in an attempt to approach his audience who found his experimental plays difficult to assimilate. Thus, the perpetually changing nature of Johnston's plays from expressionism to realism and vice versa, corresponds with the different trends that prevailed the Irish dramatic scene, a fact that makes his dramatic output stand as a genuine epitome of the Irish theatre.

Chapter One of this thesis is divided into two parts. The first part shows the history and development of the Irish Dramatic Movement in relation to Denis Johnston. It makes a cast back into its history from the early beginnings, on to the establishment of the Drama League and the Gate Theatre, on to the appearance of Denis Johnston. The poetic drama of Yeats, the realism of Martyn, the kitchen comedy of Lady Gregory and the poetic realism of Synge and O'Casey are discussed through certain plays by their respective authors to illustrate the different styles that dominated the Abbey till the appearance of Johnston. The second part of the chapter presents a detailed examination of the history, definition and technique of both realism and expressionism as two opposite genres with regard to theme, plot structure, character delineation, language, setting and style of acting, with reference to certain plays by notable figures by whom Johnston has been influenced.

Chapter Two presents a detailed analysis of all four of Johnston's experimental plays. These are *The Old Lady Says*:

"Nol", *A Bride for the Unicorn*, *The Dreaming Dust* and *Nine Rivers from Jordan*. The four plays are marked by the complete absence of the traditional unities of time, place and action. They are built on a fragmented structure that takes the forms of stations in a journey or a pilgrimage. In three of these plays the action takes place in the mind of the central character, hence, the dreamy atmosphere that tends sometimes to be nightmarish when satire is intended. The central character in all of them is either a Christ-like figure or an Everyman. As for minor characters, they may play multiple roles, lose their identities or play the roles of non human characters. They are presented not as individuals, but as prototypes with nameless designations.

The language in almost all of the four plays depends mainly on the juxtaposition of long rhetorical monologues with slang dialect and telegraphic staccato speech, as well as the use of obscure symbols, literary and mythic allusions, contrapuntal passages and the occasional reference to other languages. The detailed analysis of the four plays shows that expressionism marks all of them in different degrees and that Johnston has been influenced by many dramatic methods in world drama other than expressionism.

Chapter Three attempts an extensive study of the four major realistic plays by Johnston. These are *The Moon in the Yellow River*, *The Golden Cuckoo*, *Strange Occurrence on Ireland's Eye* and *The Scythe and the Sunset*. They are all written in the realistic form and the events are logically arranged according to the chain of cause and effect. With almost no exception, nothing improbable or illogical is likely to happen. Unlike the expressionist plays, the action depends on the illusion of reality, hence, the dream effect is out of place. The four plays are marked by a precise linear structure and dramatic economy. The characters are presented not as prototypes, but as real individuals who are likely to be found in real life. An interior

setting is always presented in details in the stage directions to aid the illusion of reality. The plays are also marked by Johnston's masterly use of colloquial prose language. Wit and humour are always there to crown his comic genius and critical insight. Although the four plays prove Johnston as a firm realist, not all of them display the same power of technique, yet, all present Johnston as a serious writer who is ever preoccupied with the hopes and pains of his country.

Finally, the Conclusion attempts to draw major broad lines about the technical features and the thematic concerns that Johnston's plays reveal. It briefly displays his dramatic achievement in an attempt to present a comprehensive and integral estimation of his contribution to Anglo- Irish drama during the first half of the century .



# CHAPTER (I)